

Learning from Phase 1 of the Place Based Social Action programme Executive Summary

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1. Introduction to the programme and places

The Place Based Social Action (PBSA) programme was launched in 2017 by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and The National Lottery Community Fund.

It represents £4.5m of investment over seven years, aiming to support local partnerships to use social action to address issues and priorities that matter to people in their community.

The programme defines social action as:

“People coming together to help improve their lives and solve the problems that are important in their communities. It involves people giving their time and other resources for the common good. This can be in a range of forms, from volunteering and community owned services to simple neighbourly acts.”

The **overall aims** of the PBSA Programme are to:

- Support **local communities, public sector organisations, service providers, civil society organisations and businesses** to work together to address local priorities
- Increase the **capability and ability of local people and organisations to take action** on the issues that matter to them
- Encourage **new ways of working**, so that the people who live and work in an area have more **meaningful influence and ownership** over local services

This executive summary and accompanying full report presents the **early experiences and reflections of places, the funders and support providers** involved in Phase 1 of the PBSA programme. It has been authored by the learning partner for the programme (Renaissi) and draws on insights captured throughout the year via phone calls, surveys and ongoing engagement, an analysis of submitted plans, and feedback from both successful and unsuccessful places at the end of Phase 1.

Programme overview and timescales

Phase and timings	Programme activities
Phase 1: Development Jan 2018-Dec 2018	<p>From a November 2017 call for Expressions of Interest 20 places were selected to take part in phase one of the programme and develop their ideas for PBSA further.</p> <p>Up to £5,000 was made available to the 20 partnerships to create a shared vision and plan for phases 2 and 3 of the programme. At the end of phase one ten places were chosen to progress to the second phase of the programme.</p>

	<p>All 20 places were also given access to a support offer which included one to one support from a dedicated adviser (referred to as Relationship Managers), a programme of social action workshops and webinars and an online forum which were delivered by a consortium of Locality, New Economics Foundation (NEF) and Co-Ops UK.</p> <p>As the learning and evaluation partner for the programme, Renaisi worked with places to build their understanding and expertise in measuring the change of their activities. This support offer remains in place for Phase 2 of the programme.</p>
<p>Phase 2: Delivery Jan 2019-Dec 2021</p>	<p>Grants of up to £240,000 are available for 10 partnerships to implement their social action plans.</p> <p>This can be spent on a wide range of activities that support the overall PBSA programme aims. A refined version of the support offer outlined above remains in place for this phase.</p>
<p>Phase 3: Scale and Sustain Jan 2022-Dec 2025</p>	<p>Grants of up to £240,000 are available for up to five partnerships to develop and expand their social action activity to sustain local outcomes beyond the duration of the PBSA programme¹</p>

Twenty places across England were chosen to take part in Phase 1 of the programme.

The **scale of operation** was defined by each partnership and varied considerably between the twenty places, ranging from activities taking place across a single neighbourhood to proposals to take a whole town or city approach to promoting and growing social action. This spanned populations of 2000 to 205,000.

The **make-up of partnerships** across Phase 1 were as diverse as the communities they sought to serve and the issues they hoped to address, bringing together a wide range of statutory, charitable and voluntary services, public and private partners, universities, sports clubs, community representatives and local stakeholders.



¹ At the time of writing, this element of the PBSA Programme was subject to review following feedback from Phase 1

2. What happened in Phase 1?

The primary focus of Phase 1 was to **develop a plan for social action** that outlined how places would achieve and resource their aspirations for the next 3-6 years of the programme.

Engagement and **co-design** were important components of the first phase of the programme. Places undertook a **broad range of activities to involve and consult with local people** on the local issues that mattered to them most. These included: events and festivals; community consultations and asset mapping exercises; surveys and questionnaires; listening campaigns and community organising; creative and arts based approaches. Places also utilised established community meetings, forums and communication channels (both in print and online).

Each place was unique in the **circumstances** and **challenges** local people faced but there were **some common issues emerging across the first stage of the programme**. These included:

- High indicators of poverty and deprivation
- Social and physical isolation
- Decline in services for young people
- Increases and changes to the local population
- Negative perceptions and low levels of confidence in local politics
- High indices of mental health problems, lower life expectancies, and other health concerns

Places also highlighted that there is **much to celebrate** about the communities in which they are working. Successful places identified **strong community connections** already in place and **established traditions of supportive neighbourhood activity** - assets they hoped to build upon through place based social action.

Opportunities and challenges for places in Phase 1

Places saw involvement in Phase 1 of the PBSA programme as **a largely positive experience**. All of the respondents surveyed 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that participation in Phase 1 had had a positive impact on their partnership so far, and they appreciated the planning time that had been built in.

However, whilst there are many benefits, place-based working is not without its challenges and there has been a recognition from the outset that partnerships are operating in a **difficult social, political and economic climate**. Phase 1 has highlighted that **PBSA does not happen in a vacuum** and the progress of places involved in the programme over the next 3-6 years will be helped and no doubt hindered by local and national context. An awareness of these challenges is important and partnerships were already giving consideration to how they might address these in their action plans for Phase 2.

Phase 1 – opportunities and benefits

- Helped partnerships to **consolidate** and **join-up activities** and conversations to **develop and clear and fully costed plan of action**
- Led to the creation of **new connections, networks and partnerships**
- Encouraged partnerships to **better engage with their community** and employ **new and creative methods** to do so
- Encouraged partners to **focus on the strengths and assets** in their places as well as the challenges



Phase 1 - challenges for places

- Limited **time and resources** with which to research and produce a plan
- Impacts of local **spending cuts** and welfare reform
- **Staff availability** and turnover
- **High population turnover** and major regeneration schemes changing community dynamics
- **Distrust** of local services and politics
- Local **apathy** and consultation/programme fatigue
- Ensuring a **broad range of community stakeholders** are engaged



Enablers and conditions that help PBSA thrive




Phase 1 of the programme has highlighted the **potential of PBSA** as an approach to tackling a wide range of local issues that can reenergise communities and make the most of local skills and knowledge. Across the first phase of the programme, the **following factors** have been important in setting the groundwork for the delivery phase of the programme:

- **Community involvement at all stages of planning and delivery** – PBSA is only going to work if there is sufficient buy-in from local residents, businesses, community and social groups.
- **Local authority commitment** - this is important as PBSA can only be effective if those with power locally are willing to change their working practices and be open to new ways of collaborating with local communities and partners – this is often easily promised but not so easily done.
- **Financial investment** - staff time, training and support for volunteers, community spaces and resources
- Adopting an **iterative approach**, reviewing activities regularly and involving local people in this process.
- **Aligning activities to local strategies and wider activities** - for example, provisions for social prescribing, and where one area identified significant areas of crossover with a citywide Children and Young People’s transformation plan.
- **Recognition events** and showing appreciation that “small changes can be big steps”
- **The role of community organisers and connectors** – They will play a key role in progressing the plans of partnerships in Phase 2. Organisers were valued for their ability to “work between the gaps” across places, their appreciation of the intricacies and sensitivities of working at the local level, and for their enthusiasm and understanding of the potential of PBSA.

3. Approaches to evaluation and learning about PBSA

Places are conducting their own evaluations (with guidance where required) with the learning partner analysing, synthesising and sharing learning across the programme.

Lessons from evaluating other place based initiatives informed this approach and an early decision was taken to avoid having a common measurement framework. For the Phase 2 application, partnerships were asked to articulate the **difference they hoped to make**, what **they would like to learn** from their activities, and how they would use this to help achieve change in their places. Some of the most **consistent outcomes** identified by the ten places in Phase 2 are summarised below.

Outcomes for individuals	Outcomes for communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased confidence and self-esteem • Increased sense of purpose • Improved wellbeing • Improved resilience and capacity to tackle personal difficulties • Raised aspirations and a sense of purpose • Improved employment skills – connected to new opportunities and forms of learning • Reduced isolation and better able to support each other • More empowered local residents - understanding their individual potential to influence change and increased knowledge of how to do this • More able to develop their interests and curiosity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective confidence and agency • An increased sense of collective strength and mission • Increased community pride • A shared understanding and commitment to tackling problems • Increased ability to self-organise and address local issues • Increased feelings of voice and being listened to • Improved knowledge of local services and how to influence their development • Increased use of public spaces • Bridging divides between different groups in the community • Increased power to influence 
Organisational and system outcomes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More activities and services that are responsive to local needs • Greater involvement of residents in co-producing services • Local organisations and partnerships recognise the power of communities to improve lives • Improved understanding amongst communities, public sector organisations, voluntary organisations and decision makers of asset based approaches • More new partnerships formed between residents, community groups, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations and businesses • Greater confidence in working across sectors on shared local issues • Increased capacity across partnerships to share resources, practices and improve trust 	

Places have also been keen to emphasise that outcomes in their plans have been co-produced with residents, and these need to be regularly reviewed to ensure they remain meaningful and relevant to those most directly involved. There was a strong interest amongst many of the places in **using evaluation approaches** that include allowing them to:

- Capture outcomes from those taking part in social action in a **proportionate** way including capturing the experiences and stories of local people
- Develop measurement tools that take into account **varying depths of engagement**
- Understand the changes people might feel in terms of their **ability to influence change in their local areas**
- Understand the **relationship between individual outcomes and area wide change**
- Encourage the partnership themselves to **reflect on their own development and learning** through the PBSA programme. Learning diaries, regular learning workshops, and action learning sets were all cited as examples of this.

As partnerships develop their thinking about evaluation and learning, one of the roles of the learning partner will be to **share ideas, good practice and successful evaluation approaches** more widely. This reflects the fact that there is value in aligning and sharing with others working on similar programmes and place-based initiatives.


4. Reflections on Phase 1 design and support

At the end of Phase 1 participants and delivery partners were asked to reflect on what they felt worked well in Phase 1 in terms of the support available and the overall programme design.

There is learning from the way the PBSA programme was designed that can be applied to future phases, and similar place based initiatives in the future.

Programme support

During Phase 1 there was a good level of engagement with the support available. The aspects that worked well and less well in Phase 1 are summarised below:

Positives	Negatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The support at the beginning was particularly effective – e.g. kick-off events in places bringing partnerships together• 1-2-1 flexible support for partnerships as they developed their plans• The opportunity to have plans reviewed and receive detailed feedback from different perspectives (delivery and learning) was the most valued element	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The amount on offer felt overwhelming at the start for some places in terms of unpicking what was necessary, useful or most relevant• Places were not always clear about the respective roles of those involved in providing support• Some places lacked time to engage and found it to be an additional burden 

- **Co-ordination of support** between the different providers – where this happened, places valued the joined up nature of the offer
- The chance to **explore different evaluation methods** proportionate to the work being planned



- It was hard to get the **pitch** of more generic support right especially given some partnerships were more experienced
- Partnerships' plans **developed at different speeds** which meant the **timing** of some of the support on offer did not always align with when it was needed most
- The **webinars** were the **least valued** element of support – with too many in too short a space of time, and a lack of clarity over who would benefit from them

This feedback has already directly fed into the design of support in Phase 2, and this was co-designed with places, funders and partners in March 2019.

Programme support recommendations

- Ensure that roles, relationships and the different elements of support on offer from providers are **clarified at the outset** to minimise confusion amongst places
- Support providers and the learning partner should ensure each place has **one point of contact** in their organisations to reduce the volume of communication from different people, and increase the likelihood of this being targeted at the most appropriate person to engage in each place
- **Design delivery and evaluation support to be flexible** – making it clear that places can pick and choose
- Ensure that the support available **aligns with delivery patterns** in each place, and is flexible enough to be evenly spread out at times that best meets their needs and requirements
- Build in **opportunities for face-to-face learning**

Programme design

The PBSA programme has been designed around three key stages, and a strong commitment to being open and non-prescriptive in terms of how partnerships and places interpret different requirements. The **competitive element** (20 places in Phase 1 hoping to be one of 10 to progress to Phase 2), **lack of co-design** in Phase 1 and **delays in guidance** were commonly cited as things that could be improved upon going forwards and adjustments to Phase 2 of the programme are being made in accordance with this feedback.

Programme design recommendations

- Clearly communicate the **aims and objectives** of the programme, and ensure that this reflects the ethos – for example, being bold, experimenting and learning in an iterative way.
- Ensure that all **information and guidance about the programme is available to grantees at the very start**. This allows partnerships to prepare most effectively for the forthcoming year, with clarity on key milestones and timing. However, this also needs to be balanced with some flexibility so that the programme can be flexible and responsive to suggestions. For example, the idea of holding visits arose during the induction events, and The National Lottery Community Fund and DCMS were able to incorporate this change.
- **Programme guidance needs to be aligned with the overall ethos** – whilst reflecting that applicants need information about the criteria that funders base their decisions on, and their expectations
- Continue to **prioritise learning** about processes, rather than placing monitoring expectations on partnerships that do not fit the nature of the activities being delivered.
- Include a **strong emphasis from the outset on planning for sustainability**, encouraging places to think about how they might transfer successful projects and activities to the community. Support to connect with other sources of funding.
- **Allow more time and money for Phase 1** – at least a full 12 months and consider a larger amount than £5k that could be spent more flexibly by places
- Remove the **match funding** element

5. Looking forwards to Phase 2

In Phase 2 plans partnerships highlighted how they will support local people and partners to maximise the possibilities from PBSA.

The most commonly occurring themes for Phase 2 include:

- **Building connections** – through supportive relationships, strengthening networks, and providing opportunities for people to come together.
- **Resident-led activities, community leadership and action** that can harness the skills, ideas, resources and energy in communities – unearthing further passions and talents.
- **Fostering a sense of belonging, shared language and identity** in communities.
- Shifting the **way organisations across different sectors work together** and with local residents
- **Tackling inequalities** and improving the life prospects of local residents.
- **Creating lasting change in communities**

In Phase 2, the four support providers will work closely with partnerships and the funders to support **learning, brokering connections and sharing insights** with each other, and beyond the Programme. Programme level learning will focus on understanding the extent to which the programme has achieved the **broader place and programme outcomes** over the next three years. These will be refined further throughout Phase 2 and 3 in collaboration with the programme partners and places.

Place level outcomes

- **Local communities and organisations** from different sectors feel more **empowered**, and increasingly able to take action on issues that matter to them
- Partnerships increase their understanding of the **social and economic issues** and **opportunities** in their areas, and what is needed to embed social action projects at place level
- Organisations and communities increase their capacity and ability to **work together in different ways** – creating new spaces for collaboration and engagement across sectors based on more equal relationships
- **More services at a local level are co-produced** through the social action projects
- Residents feel they have a **greater influence** and **ownership** over the places where they live



Programme level outcomes

- Increased understanding of **what the PBSA programme approach enables** – in particular, the support, local conditions and approaches that can allow place based social action to thrive
- Increased understanding of the **impact social action can have** on individuals, communities and organisations – and effective ways to capture and measure this
- The programme explores **what works at what scale** for place based social action
- Improved knowledge about how approaches to place based social action **change local systems**



As Phase 2 begins, the revised support offer, coupled with partnerships' desire to learn from each other and share what is working well, and less well, set the foundations to realise the full potential in the next phase of the PBSA programme.